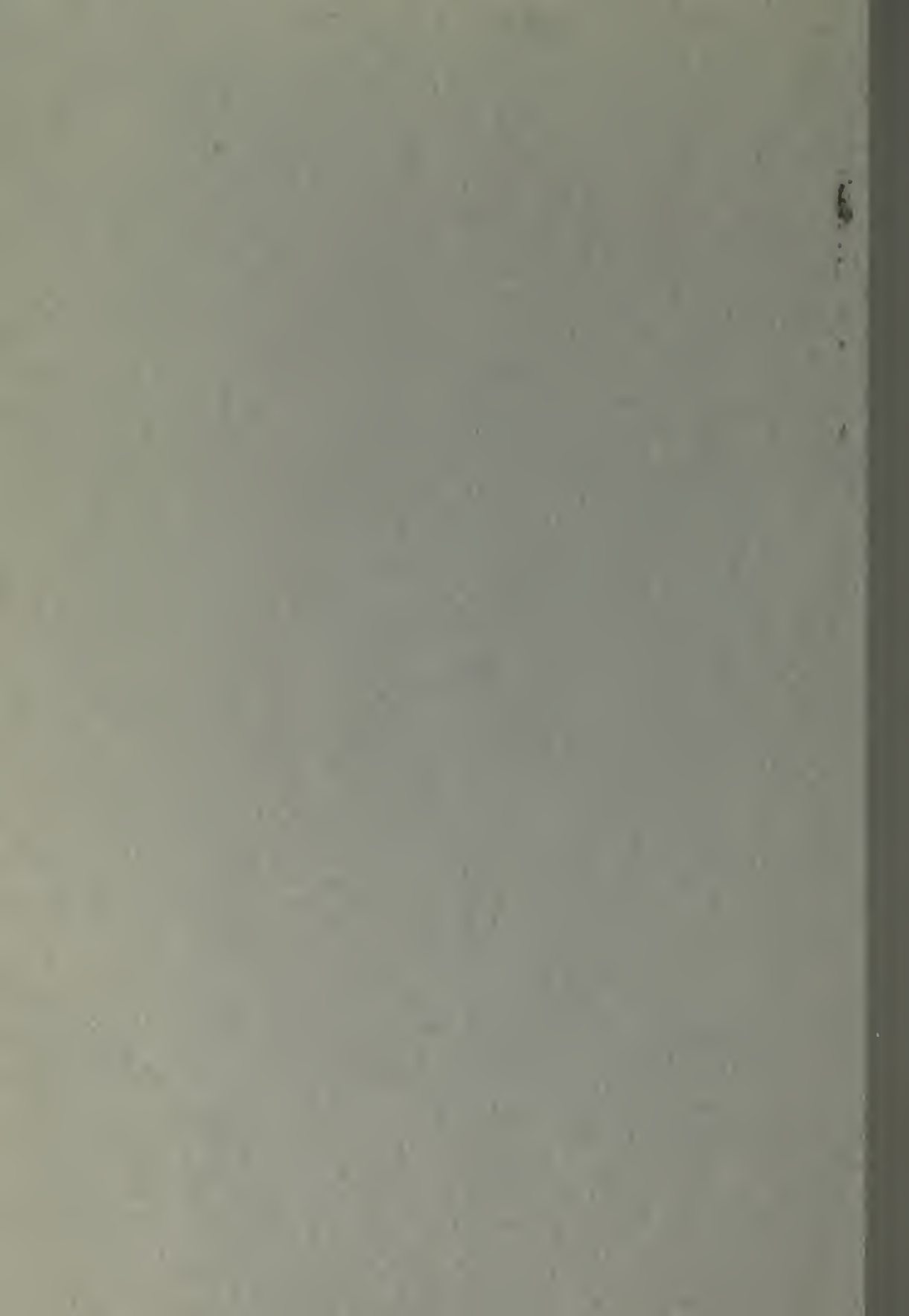


F
15
.C2
N5
no.8



PUBLICATIONS OF THE NEW ENGLAND CATHOLIC
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

No. 8

SKETCH OF THE LIFE AND
MISSIONARY LABORS

OF

REV. JAMES FITTON

BY

REV. L. P. McCARTHY, P. R.

BOSTON, 1908

PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY BY
GEORGE E. CROSBY COMPANY
234 CONGRESS ST., BOSTON

BOSTON COLLEGE LIBRARY
CHESTNUT HILL, MASS.

15
C2
H5
108

PUBLICATIONS OF THE

NEW ENGLAND CATHOLIC

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

- No. 1. By-Laws and First Report.
- No. 2. Early Irish Catholic Schools of Lowell.
By RT. REV. LOUIS S. WALSH, D. D.
- No. 3. The Acadians of Madawaska.
By REV. CHAS. W. COLLINS, Portland, Me.
- No. 4. Pilgrim, Puritan and Papist in Massachusetts.
By HELEN NORDHOFF GARGAN
- No. 5. Father Sebastian Rasle, S. J.
By REV. ARTHUR T. CONNOLLY
- No. 6. Centenary of Holy Cross Church, Franklin St., Boston.
- No. 7. Rev. Francis A. Matignon, D. D.
By REV. ARTHUR J. CONNOLLY
- No. 8. A sketch of the Missionary Labors of Rev. James Fitton
in New England.
By L. P. MCCARTHY, A. M.,
Rector of Church of the Holy Redeemer, E. Boston.

Bx1413.
B.7 M3

SKETCH *of the* LIFE AND MISSIONARY LABORS *of* REV. JAMES FITTON

by REV. L. P. McCARTHY, P. R.

In the Archives of our Cathedral of the Holy Cross, one may find precious letters, documents, records, etc., that bear testimony to the labors of bishops and clergy and to the piety and sacrifices of the children of the church throughout the extent of the six States that now form the Ecclesiastical Province of Boston. Amongst these are the records of births marriages, and deaths reaching back beyond the century.

One such book we will open and under date of the year 1805 produce the following entry: "April 13, I baptized James, born 10th inst. of Abraham and Mary Fitton: Sponsors, Michael Keating and Bridget Keefe." Signed Francis A. Matignon.

This record of birth and baptism marks the coming into natural and spiritual existence of one who, in the Providence of Almighty God, was destined to be the great Missionary of our Faith in the six New England States. I say the great missionary, advisedly. For I am not unaware that the soil of New England has been trod and retrod by the messengers of salvation for almost two centuries. The different States have each their favorite sons who labored zealously within their borders. Some of these toilers went beyond the confines of their State, and labored in two or

three States. Some spent many years at the task. Some, a few years. To one and all we give due credit, but after everything is said we will find that James Fitton, over whom the saintly Matignon poured the waters of baptism, far surpassed the others, both in point of time employed and in extent of ministration. Where other missionaries served more or less years he served a full quarter of a century. Where one or another State secured their attention, his labors extended from one end of New England to the other.

He ministered from Eastport and the New Brunswick line on the northeast, to Burlington and Lake Champlain on the northwest; from Boston in the east to Great Barrington in the Berkshire Hills in the west; from Providence and Newport in the southeast to Bridgeport and the New York State line in the southwest.

The father of the Subject of our sketch, Abraham Fitton, was born in Preston, England. He was proud of his native city and her people. For Preston in days gone by had the glory, during the persecutions against the church, of remaining true to the Catholic religion. Again and again the hirelings of Queen Elizabeth and the Stuart Kings had tried but without avail to force the new Protestant religion upon her people. By resistance to repeated assaults they became stronger instead of weaker. Every new attack only made them truer to the old faith.

He came to Boston when a young man, and in 1801 was married in the old French Huguenot Church. This church was originally built by French Protestants and stood on School Street about midway between the present Parker House and Washington Street. Owing to diminution in numbers, it passed into the hands of the Catholics of Boston in 1788, and was the first organized Catholic Church in the city.

Abraham Fitton was one of the congregation of one hundred Catholics that regularly met here for divine service in the early part of the last century. When the new church

of the Holy Cross on Franklin Street was projected he was one of those who aided in its erection, helping it along both with purse and hearty encouragement. Soon after marriage he went to Charleston, S. C., but he remained there only a short time. On his return to Boston he opened a shop adjacent to his residence and resumed work at his trade which was that of a wheelwright.

Mary Fitton his wife, the mother of our missionary, was of Welsh extraction and a convert to the church before marriage. She lived to a very advanced age and through life was noted for her sturdy Catholicity. She never ceased to thank God for the priceless gift of faith. Until the failure of her eyesight, she read faithfully every day a chapter of the Following of Christ. Mrs. Fitton was an intimate friend of the mother of our late Archbishop and the latter once told me that one of his earliest recollections was to accompany his mother and Mrs. Fitton to a display of fireworks on Boston Common on a Fourth of July night.

James Fitton, whom we will call the missionary, was born in Boston at the corner of Milk and Devonshire Streets, on the site of the present Boston Post Office, and less than a stone's throw from the spot where twelve years later was born another defender of the faith, Rt. Rev. John B. Fitzpatrick—third Bishop of Boston. The youth of James Fitton was spent in attendance at the schools of his native town. Before the opening of school in the morning he would drive his father's cows to pasturage on Boston Common, and after school's dismissal for the day, would bring them back for the evening milking. After some years the family removed to the old Gov. Dearborn Estate in Roxbury, where now stands the Mission Church. From his new residence he would walk every morning over Boston Neck, past the site of the present Cathedral, to the church on Franklin Street, to serve Mass. This was a long trip in the heats of summer, with but little shade to protect one from the burning sun's rays. It was still more trying in winter when snowy weather was en-

countered and unbeaten roads were the rule, rather than the exception. No doubt God was unconsciously preparing the youth for those journeyings that were for many years to be the great feature of his life. At the proper season of the year, he never failed on returning from church to bring home to his mother his hat filled with choice mushrooms collected from the roadside and fields, where now nothing can be seen save solid business and residential blocks.

We have in our possession a certificate of good conduct and scholarship given him at this period of his life by Master Sewall. Bishop Cheverus pleased with the fidelity of the boy, and knowing well the good stock from which he sprung, advised him, after questioning with regard to vocation, to take up the study of Latin. Having finished his preliminary studies he was sent for the completion of his classical course to the Academy at Claremont, N. H. The Principal of the Academy was Virgil Horace Barber, one of the notable family of converts of a century ago. Virgil Barber had been a Protestant minister; he and wife, son and four daughters became converts. The father and son afterwards became Jesuit priests, his wife and one daughter, Visitation Nuns, the three other daughters, Ursulines. Mary, one of these latter was a Sister in the Ursuline Convent at Charlestown the night it was burnt by a mob. Virgil's father, a minister, became a convert as also his aunt, Mrs. Tyler, with her son, who later became first Bishop of Hartford, and four daughters, all of whom died Sisters of Charity.

To this Academy at Claremont also came at this time two young men, who afterward were to make their mark in the religious life of New England, William Tyler and William Wiley. Virgil Barber had before conversion been the President of an Academy at Fairfield, N. Y. for many years. He was therefore well equipped and able to inform the minds of his young pupils with all the necessary secular knowledge. An incident will show that he could also edify them by the fervor and decorum of his life.

A few years before Father Fitton's death, one of Virgil's daughters wrote him from her convent home, and requested any facts of interest which he might have regarding her father. Amongst other things our missionary wrote her as follows: "When the College of Claremont was in full progress and the house adjoining was occupied by students our curiosity was excited to know if your father ever slept, and if so, where did he sleep. And, behold we found his bed to consist of a narrow strip of carpet unfolded at night on the floor and then folded in the morning and hid in a corner of the closet." This was the type of man who formed the mind and character of these three young men, who were to be in the future Apostles of New England.

In due time the three youths returned to Boston to take up the study of Theology in the house of Bishop Fenwick. Father Fitton thus describes the doings of this period: "The bishop had but one priest in the city to assist him, Rev. P. Byrne, with whom he alternated in the duties of preaching, hearing confessions, etc.

Yet in addition to these laborious duties he had also taken a class of young theologians whom he instructed daily in the science of Divinity, hoping that at a future day they would be able to take part in the duties of the ministry and become useful and active laborers in the Lord's Vineyard; and in this hope he was not disappointed. These students were to him, to use his own expression, like another self. He lavished on them every care. His house was their house, his table their table, his time entirely at their disposal, and they lived with him as at their father's house, receiving lessons in Theology from his own lips and profiting by his example and experience. And his knowledge of the human heart and his experience "were second to no man's."

The Ember Days of December, 1827, saw two of these Ecclesiasties promoted to the Holy Priesthood, Messrs. Fitton and Wiley. At the time of the ordination of these young men there were about six thousand eight hundred

Catholics in Boston, and but seven priests in all New England. It is easy to enumerate them. Bishop Fenwick and Father Byrne in Boston; Father Mahony at Salem; Father Barber at Claremont, N. H.; Father French, Portland and Dover; Father Ryan, Whitefield, Me., and Father Woodley, Providence and Newport. During the winter the two young priests remained in Boston under the vigilant eye of their beloved Bishop, making incursions into neighboring towns to say Mass and administer the Sacraments. One evening, shortly after ordination, the brass knocker on the door of the Cathedral residence was struck violently. On opening, our missionary found that it was a sick call. Where? to New Bedford, fifty-six miles away! There was no telephone nor telegraph, nor were there railroads in those days and the stage-coach had already gone. A carriage was hastily engaged and after a hurried drive through the night, the home of the sick man was reached at four o'clock in the morning. But the poor man was dead. His last words were of regret in not having the ministrations of a priest.

Shortly afterwards came a call to Taunton, thirty miles away, followed in a few days, by a call to Northampton, in the Connecticut Valley, one hundred and five miles away. In these days, when our sick calls come from nearby, it seems hard to realize, that we have known intimately, a priest, who from yonder Franklin Street in this City of Boston, would be summoned to a call that would require the travel of more than two hundred miles.

In the summer previous to the ordination of these young men, Bishop Fenwick made an extended trip into Maine, and one of the pleasures that helped to counterbalance the hardships of that journey was his visit to the Passamaquoddy tribe of Indians at Pleasant Point, near Eastport. The Indians saw in the person of the Bishop, their spiritual father and protector, and their joy was unbounded. When leaving, he told them he would send a priest as soon as possible. Immediately on his return to Boston, he wrote to France,

and two priests were promised him. Whilst awaiting their arrival, word reached him that a certain Puritan minister had come amongst his swarthy children and by presents of trinkets, clothing, gold and silver, had attempted to proselytize them. He determined to thwart him, and choose Father Fitton, as the healthier and stronger of the recently ordained, to go and defeat the preacher's designs.

Our missionary went by packet-boat to Eastport, thence to the Indian Village, and did not desist till the preacher, bag and baggage, was forced to depart. This was his first distant missionary experience. The second winter he spent at home, helping in Cathedral work, and on Sundays generally on the out-missions. The following summer he was deputed by his bishop to visit Catholics scattered through Vermont and New Hampshire. The stage-coach that was to be his mode of conveyance for years to come, was sought and a seat secured. In due time he reached Southern Vermont, where he began his labors. These States that are now dotted with churches and schools, then contained but few children of the Faith. Here are a few figures: In Pittsford there were sixty Catholics; Castleton, thirty; Poultney, twenty-one; Wallingford, fourteen; Bennington, forty-eight, etc.

Several months were spent on this trip, administering the sacraments and saying Mass, where even one or two Catholic families were to be found. As an evidence of the deep faith and piety of these poor Catholic people, deprived of the service of the priest for a long time we have but to turn to one of these towns—Pittsford. Having said Mass in this place, he announced at its close, that on the following day he would offer the Holy Sacrifice at Wallingford, eighteen miles distant. What were eighteen miles to those poor, Irish exiles, when compared with the luxury of hearing another Mass? So, the entire party, with one or two exceptions, who could not go, accompanied him the entire eighteen miles, and on the following morning had the inexpressible satisfaction of once more adoring their God in the

Eucharistic Sacrifice. What a rebuke is this and similar examples to Catholics of our day, who absent themselves from Mass for a little snow or rain, even though they live near enough to see the church spires from their windows. Many years afterwards, in the quietude of his study, our missionary, recalling the faith of these people and the kindness shown him by Protestants, declared that for open-hearted hospitality and kindness, the Green Mountain Boys were not surpassed, if equalled, by the people of any other State. Here the village school would be placed at his disposal. There the Town House and occasionally even the Meeting-House. Before or after the discourse or lecture, one or other of the mixed audience, generally a Protestant, would invite him to luncheon, which consisted of pie and cheese and a mug of home-pressed cider.

He continued thence to Burlington, then crossed the State into New Hampshire, and after several months' absence returned to Boston.

St. Mary's Church in Charlestown had been dedicated some few months before and here his assistance at Sunday services was particularly prized. He would walk Sunday after Sunday from the residence on Franklin Street to St. Mary's with the vestments, etc., needed for the Holy Sacrifice enclosed in a spacious red bandana handkerchief under his arm. After Sunday school and Mass he would travel back the entire distance before breaking his fast.

But a change was coming for the young priest that was to separate him from his beloved Boston for an exact quarter of a century. The jurisdiction of Bishop Fenwick extended north and south, from Canada to Long Island Sound. Up to this time priests from New York City had occasionally made visits into the southern and western parts for the purpose of administering the Sacraments. In July, 1829, Rt. Rev. Bishop Fenwick visited a growing town, about midway between Boston and New York City, the present thriving, episcopal city of Hartford. He found that an old church

of the Episcopalians there, was for sale. We may form an idea of the Cradle Church of Connecticut Catholicity, when we say that it was purchased by the bishop, for five hundred dollars, plus four hundred for the organ. Over this he installed Rev. Bernard O'Cavanaugh, in August, 1829. Possession of the church was given to the Catholics in November, not through direct sale, for bigotry was then too rampant, but through the agency of a Protestant gentleman. In June of the following year, 1830, came the dedication, and on the 31st of the next month Father Fitton arrived in Hartford. The exact number of Catholics then in Hartford is not known, but there could not have been many, for two years afterward there were but 120 communicants.

But Hartford, at this time, derived its importance in the eyes of the church, not for the Catholics it harbored, but because it was to be the new centre from which the ministrations of the clergy were to be extended to all Connecticut and Central and Western Massachusetts. Fifteen months after Father Fitton's arrival, Father O'Cavanaugh left for Detroit, and our Missionary for the eleven months following was the only priest in Connecticut and Central and Western Massachusetts. Think of it. In Connecticut at the present day there are 342 priests and 395,000 Catholics; in Springfield 316 priests and 323,000 Catholics. See the increase from one priest and 2,000 Catholics to 658 priests and 720,000 Catholics, in three-quarters of a century. And remember, all this in only a corner of the then Diocese of Boston, and in but a portion of the territory over which our missionary labored.

From Hartford Father Fitton extended his visitations to every place where a child of the faith was to be found. Every town and village and settlement in turn was visited and stations established at Middletown, New Haven, Bridgeport, Waterbury, New London, Norwich, Stonington, Windsor Locks, Thompsonville, Portland and Westerly, in Connecticut; and at Saxonville, Springfield, Amherst, Barre,

Ware, Blackstone, Warren, Webster, Chicopee, Barrington, Northampton, Westfield and Worcester in Massachusetts.

A celebrated commander, when asked during the activities of a campaign, where his headquarters might be found, replied, "In the saddle"; so Father Fitton, during his six years in Connecticut, might have answered to a similar inquiry, "My headquarters will be along the wayside, somewhere in Connecticut or Massachusetts." In most of the large cities and towns that now exist in this district he offered the first or certainly one of the first Masses ever offered in the place. In Waterbury, where there are now nine churches and 18 priests; Bridgeport, 16 churches and 28 priests; Springfield, eight churches and 17 priests; Worcester, 14 churches and 35 priests, and many other places not necessary to mention.

In the greater part of his travels, the stage-coach was the vehicle for transportation. It was not like the coach of to-day, but in construction something similar to the type made familiar by the "Wild West Show." Here face to face met judge and doctor, professional and business man, with a sprinkling of women. As its speed did not ordinarily exceed six or seven miles in an hour, it was evident that for a journey of a considerable distance, it was an all day or all night affair. Many staunch friendships were formed during these lengthy trips and the priest had leisure and opportunity for explaining points of doctrine and removing from the minds of his fellow passengers the false impressions regarding the Catholic Church imbibed perhaps in childhood.

There was, however, an occasional occupant of the coach that the priest dreaded to meet. It was the female religious disputant. She generally was a near relative of a minister, or one whose hobby was religion. In controversy she had the sympathy, often encouragement of the other passengers, and even though worsted in argument with the "Popish Priest," like Goldsmith's school master, she could argue still. Our missionary had often met her like, and almost invariably

the disputation would end with the usual re-hash of the strange things going on under the sanction of the Catholic Church. Father Fitton had determined to nip arguments with such people in the bud, politely but effectively. He had not long to wait. Having taken the coach on a certain day, he found he was the only male passenger. Scarcely had the horses started, when a female piping voice was heard from the rear of the coach, "Can man forgive sins?" "Most assuredly, madam," came back the reply from the male passenger, and women, too, I trust."

The rest of the party smiled, as if to say, "Look out, Miss you may have awakened the wrong passenger." But our good Puritan dame was not to be so easily silenced. Again she returned to the attack. "I do not quite understand you, sir." "Pray, tell me how can man forgive sins?" "Well," said the missionary, "let us suppose that a friend of yours had turned against you and injured your good name. Afterward she repented of it and begged you earnestly to forgive her. Wouldn't you do so?" "Certainly," replied our disputant. "Well, now," says the priest, "if women can forgive sins, why can't men?" The end of the controversy was reached so suddenly and unexpectedly that it quite took away the breath of the fair controversialist, and silence reigned supreme for the rest of the trip.

During 1835 and thereabout, sick calls, many in number, summoned the priest in the direction of Worcester. The Great Western Railroad, now the Boston and Albany, was extending its tracks westward and on account of the conformation of the soil, many rocky hills and ledges were encountered. This made blasting necessary, and as a consequence, many accidents happened. As the majority of the railroad builders were Irish, the priest was the first one called for when injury resulted from careless blasting. Then, again, as Catholics were increasing in Worcester, various parties from the town had called upon the Bishop in Boston and entreated him to send them a resident priest. For one

and another reason, the Bishop, at last consented, and in May, 1836, Father Fitton came to take up his residence in Worcester.

Before we leave Hartford, let us go back to the Christmas of '31, and quote from a private letter written at the time at New Haven by a person who was present at the occurrence which he describes. It reads as follows: "Whenever we expected the priest, we all came together to receive him. One Saturday, in particular, it was the eve of Christmas, and anticipating Midnight Mass we were all at our accustomed place of meeting, awaiting his arrival, but he did not come. We were certain he would not disappoint us, whilst at the same time we could not account for his delay. At length, we concluded to go out and see if we might meet him. We did so and met him on the road outside of New Haven. The sleighing from Hartford had been good part of the way and then failed till nothing but bare ground remained, and his horse gave out.

The distance from Hartford to this city is about thirty-four miles, but the good priest not wishing to disappoint us, determined to walk the rest of the way. When we met him he had his valise, containing his vestments, etc., on his shoulders. The walking being rough and frozen, his shoes were nearly worn out and when he arrived that night he was scarcely able to preach, though he did so at the end of Mass. After which we secured a conveyance to leave him where he had left his horse (for he had to return and say another Mass at Hartford the same day)." Sixty-eight miles, the greater part while fasting, through a cold December night. How many similar trying experiences that are known to God alone must have been encountered during the long career of our devoted missionary!

Father Fitton's settlement at Worcester as its first Parish Priest, was not by any means his first visit to Worcester. From time to time in his early years at Hartford he had come to the town, and for two years before he fixed

his residence there, had attended it monthly. During these previous visits he laid the foundation of a church and in this first year of his pastorate saw it completed. This church, Christ Church, was the first one erected and he was the first settled Pastor within the limits of the present Diocese of Springfield. At the first Mass said by Father Fitton in the new, but unroofed building, a violent summer shower burst over the people about the time of the Elevation of the Sacred Host. Three members of the congregation procured umbrellas, and holding them over the celebrant's head, moved to and fro with him during the Holy Sacrifice. The people were drenched to the skin, but not a single one moved to a place of shelter.

The first Mass in the town was said some years before by our missionary during one of his first trips to Worcester from Hartford. It was offered in an old stone building on Front Street occupied by a respectable mechanic, by the name of McKillop. After this in pleasant weather Masses were said on the rocks near the deep cut on the Boston and Albany Railroad.

The first Catholic sermon in the town was preached in a tavern called the Old Elephant on the stage road between Boston and Springfield. The audience consisted of Irish railroad laborers, maid servants, stage drivers and others, whom piety or curiosity had brought there. "Notwithstanding this," says one who was present, "all the audience evinced as much decorum as though they were in a consecrated house of prayer." Settlement in Worcester gave him the opportunity of giving greater care and attention to the numerous colonies of Irish settlers in the neighborhood. He also extended his ministrations eastward as far as Waltham, northward into New Hampshire, southward through the Blackstone Valley to Woonsocket and Eastern Connecticut to New London. The building of the Providence and Worcester Railroad brought additional children of the faith into these localities, but as the soil for the road-

bed was of a gravelly or sandy nature there was not the persistent demand for the priest's visits as in the more dangerous cuttings of the Great Western road. In the absence of churches, Mass was said in the laborers' shanties along the railroad bed, then in pleasant weather under a wide-spreading oak or maple tree. Again in the back room of a tavern and even in the bar-room with bottles and decanters concealed from sight by hanging quilts and blankets. At other times the village school-house and even the Protestant church; all in turn were laid under tribute to the Holy and Unspotted Sacrifice. We have many times seen the stout valise which he carried in every direction where sudden calls or duty summoned him. It held the silk vestments of several rubrical colors, altar linens, a missal not much larger than a breviary, folded altar cards, a small chalice in three sections now in possession of our Sisters, a bookstand that could be folded like a carpenter's rule, a soutane, holy oils, candles, and altar wine.

But a more substantial and enduring monument to his memory than the honor of first Mass or first Church or first pastorate connects his name with Catholicity in the heart of the Commonwealth. Contemporary with the erection of the church in Worcester, our missionary had purchased some sixty acres of land on the outskirts of the city on a rising knoll, called Pocachoag by the Indians, or Hill of Pleasant Springs. The healthfulness of the location and the natural beauty of the landscape surrounding it, were to a great extent controlling factors in its purchase. On this beautiful spot he erected a building in 1840 for the more advanced education of Catholic young men. He called it the Seminary of Mount St. James, in honor of his patron. For that early period of Catholicity in Worcester, the Seminary was quite a grand structure with its central and side buildings two stories high and extending to the length of seventy feet. This Seminary opened with ten pupils and it remained in operation, counting its students from Maine to Texas, for a period

of two years. In 1842 he deeded the Seminary with a small cottage and the land to Bishop Fenwick, and the latter, taking possession, placed it under the care of the Fathers of the Society of Jesus. On the Feast of St. Aloysius, June 21st, of the following year, 1834, the corner stone of a new college was laid and the building completed in January, 1844, and this new building with the old Seminary was opened as the College of the Holy Cross. In the deed of conveyance to the Bishop, Father Fitton put the proviso that for all time to come the property thus transferred should be devoted to educational purposes. It was not to be divided up for manufacturing or residential uses nor even for penal, correctional or purely charitable objects, but for education.

He gave it into the hands of the bishop for various reasons. The first was the absolute impossibility of attending to his varied missionary labors and conducting an institution of such a nature. Then again he wished by this donation to testify to the deep sense of respect and love which pervaded the very fibre of his being for one who was not only his bishop but since his youthful days his best father and friend. Lastly, he knew that the outcome of his gift would be the placing of the school on a basis which would ensure untold good for the future of the church in New England. He had a high regard for the Jesuit Order and for its traditional efforts towards imbuing the tender minds of youth with a relish for the cultivation of the liberal arts and the practice of Christian virtues. In his early days in the priesthood, he had confided to Bishop Fenwick his own desire to join the Order, but the mere expression of such a wish carried its immediate rejection. The bishop told him that he was too much needed by his people, he was just where God wanted him to be and where his life's work lay. In a great undertaking a first step well chosen is not everything, but it counts for a great deal. So if Father Murphy, President of Holy Cross, could with pardonable pride say in his College Prospectus last summer that Holy Cross was the oldest

Catholic College in New England, and the largest Catholic College in the United States, not a little of the credit for such a showing is due to our missionary whose generosity made it possible.

In recent years the well laid out Athletic Grounds connected with the College has received his name, and in future, thanks to the Faculty, the name of the original founder will not perish from Holy Cross annals whilst Fitton Field remains; dedicated to the "*Mens Sana in Corpore Sano*."

In August of 1842, we find him in Boston with thirty other priests of New England in attendance at the solemn exercises of the first Diocesan Retreat. It was conducted by Rev. Father McElroy, S.J., and lasted eight days. At its conclusion, August 21st, the first Synod of the Diocese was held.

Shortly after the corner stone laying of the new college of the Holy Cross in the summer of 1843, he received an unexpected command from the bishop to proceed to Providence. In that city a pastor of the old church, who had done very faithful work and in an effective manner championed the cause of temperance, was weakened by his zealous labors and a leave of absence was granted him by his bishop. A self-constituted committee of laymen, seven in number, came to Boston and demanded of the bishop that he send back to them their old pastor. When he refused to do so, they threatened schism, and returning to Providence, they with some six others seized the church keys, books and temporalities and began to inaugurate a form of trusteeism. The bishop hearing of it, at once placed the church under interdict. Then he wrote Father Fitton to go to Providence and speak to the misguided men and bring order out of confusion. The latter arrived in the city on a Saturday evening, and on the next day said Mass and when it was finished requested the people to be seated. He explained to them the propriety and the absolute necessity of obedience to duly constituted authority; that lay people should not interfere

in the administration of church affairs. He then showed them clearly that the most fruitful cause of all the strife and wrangling and contention in the world lay in man's neglect of his own in order to attend to his neighbor's business. Then in his strong and powerful way, his sonorous voice rang out that those who were in possession of the goods of the church should come forward and lay them on the table which he placed before the altar. Deep silence for a few minutes followed the strong appeal. Presently from one side came a member and deposited the property of the church which he held; from another side appeared another of the malcontents, till at last everything was placed on the table.

Being much pleased with the success of his work, he followed with a few conciliatory words and peace once again settled over the parish. He remained here almost a year and with his old friend, Father Wiley, in the adjoining parish of St. Patrick's, good feeling between priests and people prepared the way for a proper reception to the new bishop, Wm. Tyler, who was consecrated on the 17th of the following March. Our missionary, on coming to Providence, had no place outside of the church sanctuary for chair or table. He proceeded to build a small, one-story house, consisting of three rooms; kitchen, sleeping room and work room. It sufficed for his needs, but a three-room house was hardly large enough for an Episcopal Residence. Still, this was Bishop Tyler's house for some little while. We have an idea of the size of this Bishop's Palace from the fact that one who knew said he could place it on a truck and cart it off to any part of the city.

During the summer of 1844 the three friends of College days in Claremont were once more together; the youngest, however, was now the Superior—Tyler, Fitton, and Wiley. A temperance parade took place on the 4th of July between the parishes of Father Wiley and Father Fitton, and shortly after the latter left the city to become the pastor of all Rhode Island outside of Providence. This arrangement, which con-

cerned particularly its three largest towns, Newport, Woonsocket and Pawtucket, remained in force from '44 to '46. Father Fitton had previously visited Woonsocket from Hartford in '34 when he said Mass for the thirty Catholics, then resident in the town, and again in the early 40's, during his many visits through the Blackstone Valley from Worcester. The little wooden church of Bishop Fenwick's favorite dimensions, 60 x 40, and costing two thousand dollars was just completed in this year. Pawtucket also shared in his frequent ministrations during these two years, and when, for one reason or other, Mass could not be offered at the stated time, aid would be given from the Cathedral in Providence.

The number of Catholics increasing, the bishop determined to narrow still more the extensive boundaries of our Missionary's Parish. For though Rhode Island, "Little Rhody" is not of colossal proportions, still when a man has the whole of it for a parish, with the exception of one city, he will find it extensive enough; so in 1846 Woonsocket and Pawtucket passed into other hands, and Father Fitton became Pastor of Newport. Up to this, Mass had been offered in Newport but once a month, now it would be said every Sunday, even daily. There were then in Newport three hundred and seventy-five Catholics all told. The little church being considered unsafe, Father Fitton at once bought land for a new one, and in a few months, the spot where stands now the beautiful church of Our Lady of the Isle in brown stone with parochial residence and convent, was bought. Some wealthy summer visitors had already begun to make their homes in the seaport town, but nevertheless the great bulk of the people were poor Irish laborers and their children. Amongst these summer residents two in particular deserve lasting gratitude, both for the material aid given and for the enthusiasm infused into the pastor at the time of his projection of the new church.

They were Miss Emily Harper and her mother, Mrs. Goodly Harper. This latter was a daughter of Charles

Carroll of Carrollton, the last survivor of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, and the niece of Archbishop Carroll, first bishop of our country. They not only paid four thousand dollars for the land, but contributed three thousand dollars additional toward the erection of the church and also gave an annual offering.

The building of this church, which, even to-day is one of the finest churches of the Diocese, was to say the least a bold undertaking, for during its erection the Catholic population did not number more than six or seven hundred souls. Even with the assistance of a few wealthy summer residents, the people of Newport must have been a very generous body, for when Father Fitton left them in 1855, out of \$42,000 that the church had cost, but \$11,000 of debt remained.

Father Fitton came to Boston during its construction and raised a respectable sum of money by collections in the churches, just as he had gone as far as Washington in the early thirties to collect for his little church in Hartford.

During the Civil War, and for a number of years following, the portrait of a military officer in full regimentals might have been seen in Father Fitton's study in East Boston. It was the photograph of a lieutenant of the Army, afterwards the famous war-hero, Major Gen. W. S. Rosecrans, "Old Rosey" as his soldiers loved to call him. When the new St. Mary's was projected, it was he, then Commander of Fort Adams in Newport Harbor, who lent his valuable skill and knowledge of civil engineering to its planning and afterwards superintended its erection. He was at the same time Superintendent of the Sunday School, and on Sundays might be seen in full uniform heading the procession of children to their places in the church. Some years ago, his brother died Bishop of Columbus, Ohio. His wife, through the prayers, as he ascribed it, of the Irish domestics in his family, became a fervant convert. His son, baptized by Father Fitton, became a Paulist Missionary, and in Father Fitton's time preached a mission in East Boston.

St. Mary's was consecrated some twenty-five years ago, the first church to be consecrated in the Providence Diocese. Whilst the erection of the church was proceeding, our missionary received an invitation to attend Bishop Tyler as Theologian, to the Seventh Provincial Council of Baltimore, in 1849. The Bishop was then in consumption and had not long to live. He wished to attend the Council for one reason in particular, that he might, through the aid of the Fathers secure a Coadjutor Bishop. On his way home from Baltimore he contracted inflammatory rheumatism. In five weeks' time he breathed his last. He died as he had lived, a Saint. "Notwithstanding his sufferings," says his physician, "not a word of complaint escaped his lips; his patience and resignation were superior to the sufferings of the flesh."

It was the belief of the clergy of the Diocese that Father Fitton would succeed him in the Bishopric. Bishop Tyler himself was partial to it, as also Bishop Fitzpatrick. But New England was then in the Ecclesiastical Province of New York. Not only Bishop Tyler's immediate successor, but his second successor was chosen from that State.

In March of 1850, he returned to Providence and took charge of the Cathedral until a head of the Diocese would be appointed. Here he remained from March to November of that year, and on the coming of Bishop O'Reilly, returned to Newport.

During the next four or five years he was hard at work on his new church striving by his labors and efforts to erect a church that would be second to none in the Diocese.

Unexpectedly, in April, 1855, news that meant much to him, came from Boston. Father Wiley, who had returned to Boston in 1851, was reported as dying at his home in East Boston. For four years he had been pastor on the Island, and had planned and laid the foundation of the stately Rockport granite Church of the Most Holy Redeemer. Bishop Fitzpatrick called from time to time to the bedside of

Father Wiley. One day the feeble and worn-out clergymen, companion of Father Fitton in school and Seminary, and at Ordination, also his sharer in the hardships of missionary life, asked the bishop to grant to him, a dying man, a special favor. The bishop replied that if possible he would do all in his power to grant it. "Well then," said Father Wiley, "I wish you would bring Father Fitton to East Boston, that he might finish building this church, which I have begun." "How can that be," said the bishop, "for he is now in another diocese." "You can do it," said the dying man, "if you try." He promised to do all that he possibly could. He at once entered into negotiations with Bishop O'Reilly of Hartford, and in August of that year, our missionary came to East Boston to take up the work begun by his predecessor.

Father Fitton on assuming the Pastorate of East Boston did not come to enjoy a well-earned rest after the activities of a long missionary life. None deserved it more than he, but though he was now to cease from missionary travels, he was not to desist from labor. One would think that the building of such a beautiful edifice as St. Mary's at Newport, would be enough for any one man in a lifetime, but it was only an incident in his career. He set to work at once vigorously and in August, 1857, the "Most Holy Redeemer," complete in every detail was dedicated to the worship of Almighty God by Rt. Rev. Bishop Fitzpatrick.

Little did he think, he often said, that he was carving out work for himself when he advised Father Wiley, some time before, to build of stone instead of brick, as originally planned; for stone churches are much more costly than those of any other material. Very few buildings, even in Boston, were built of stone in those days. Of stone churches there were fewer still. Father Wiley on seeing the grand proportions and pleasing effect of the Newport church was easily persuaded to change his design from brick to stone. And so he planned what his successor was to finish, the noble Church of the Most Holy Redeemer, dear to East Bostonians for the past half a century.

It is Gothic in design—one of the first churches drawn by the eminent church architect, P. C. Keely. It is a design in church building that is a perpetual sermon in stone, for like the religion which it symbolizes, the Gothic style of architecture throws upwards its stately lines to carry the eye toward Heaven.

A few years afterward we find him buying land for a new church in that part of the District called the Fourth Section. Here at the close of the Civil War he erected the Church of the Star of the Sea. Then, the Church of the Assumption, in what is known as the First Section, was built, and in the early seventies, the Church of the Sacred Heart.

Those who knew not what our missionary had seen of the progress of Catholicity thought him a dreamer, as one after another of the churches that dot the Island were projected by him. The last one, they thought was entirely uncalculated for; that parish is now the largest of the four.

We have given to Father Fitton, the proud title of the great Missionary of New England, and we venture to assert that no one will dispute the honor. We now claim for him another privilege. He was the first priest in New England to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary, the Golden Jubilee of his Priesthood. More than that, he was New England born and bred and from the cradle to the grave his whole life was passed within its borders.

This celebration took place in December, 1877. The festivities lasted four days. The first day was for the children. An exquisite program was rendered by them followed by presentation of valuable gifts from Sisters of Notre Dame and from the children. On the fourth Sunday of Advent of that year, the exact anniversary day, the Most Reverend Archbishop Williams occupied the throne. The celebrant of the High Mass was the Jubilarian himself, using a gold chalice presented to him that morning by the Archbishop. Old parishioners of the Most Holy Redeemer will easily remember the strong, but remarkably sweet voice of their old

pastor. Scores of clergymen, in the half a century existence of the church have sung High Mass within its walls. Those who know can assert without fear of contradiction that for power and resonance, the singing voice of our missionary was certainly equal, if not superior, to any of them. Bishop Healey of Portland, an old friend, preached the sermon. A second gold chalice was presented to him on this day by St. Mary's of Newport. At the close of Mass appropriate resolutions were read by Rev. C. T. McGrath of Somerville. Then eleven survivors of the fourteen young men, who had been trained by him in the Sanctuary and were now vested with the dignity of the Priesthood, presented him with a complete set of gold vestments. We may remark in passing that the fourteen bearers of the honors of the priesthood of those days have given way to forty from the Island Wards at the present moment. Of the eleven who greeted their spiritual Father on the day of his Jubilee, the following are still living: Mgr. P. J. Harkins of Holyoke; Mgr. A. J. Teeling of Lynn; Rev. C. T. McGrath of Somerville; Rev. John Fleming of Dedham; Rev. M. F. Delaney of Natick; Rev. T. F. Cusack of Chelsea, and the writer of this sketch. Former and present altar boys, former and present choir members, sodalities and societies followed with valuable offerings. Lastly a committee representing the four parishes, gave a munificent present in gold. The third day of celebration was passed in the Cathedral. Father Fitton again officiated and the clergy of the Diocese in large numbers assisted. Father Shahan of Malden, himself a former missionary and an old time pupil of St. James Seminary of Worcester, was to preach, but a severe attack of sickness prevented. After Mass they repaired to the Sodality Chapel where a sumptuous banquet was tendered the Venerable Pastor by his brother diocesan priests. The last day's festivity was given by the Catholic Union of Boston. Amongst the speakers at this noteworthy reception was the celebrated General James Shields, the hero of three wars and United States Senator from three States.

But a sketch of Father Fitton without mention of his efforts for Catholic Education would be a very incomplete one indeed. One would say that in his day he was far ahead of his time in advocating what everyone now acknowledges to be of prime importance, a daily, systematic training of the young in the knowledge of religion. And it is all the more remarkable that he should espouse the cause of exclusively Catholic schools, because he himself was largely the product of secular schools. By a sort of instinct or intuition, he foresaw that the progress of the church in the future greatly depended on Catholic Education. Even before his ordination he had taken a lively interest in the one Catholic school of Boston. When the Cathedral on Franklin Street was enlarged and school rooms were prepared in the basement he found time to engage in educational work even while pursuing his theological studies with Bishop Fenwick. He continued this after ordination whenever possible, up to the time of his departure for Hartford. After that the school passed into the hands of the priests of the Cathedral parish. At Hartford he had his school, it was presided over by a convert who was highly educated and deeply religious. At Worcester, also, the opening of the Parochial School followed closely in the wake of the building of the church. Then there was St. James Seminary, now the College.

In Providence a school in the basement and one also in Newport showed that wherever residence was secured, there also a school sprang into being. In those days religious teaching bodies of men and women were rarely met with, so you may judge of his happiness, when in the summer of '54, a colony of Sisters came to him in Newport, one year before he left for Boston. But it was in the Island Wards of East Boston, where he passed the last twenty-six years of his life, that his devotion to schools reached its climax. Here, in advanced life, he showed that the zeal for Catholic Education that possessed him in youthful days had lost none of its fervor and so it could no longer be called a fad or fancy, but a

settled conviction. Two years after the dedication of the Most Holy Redeemer, three Sisters of Notre Dame from Lancaster Street, Boston, came to open a new school in the old church of St. Nicholas. This coming year, 1909, will be the Golden Jubilee of this school in East Boston.

During these fifty years the three Sisters of Notre Dame have increased to sixty Sisters of the same order, thirteen Sisters of Mercy, thirteen Xaverian Brothers and five Lay Teachers. And the one hundred children, to thirty-six hundred, that now attend the Island Schools. It seems that a blessing went from him, that made successful and fruitful whatever he undertook in the line of Catholic Education. Our late Archbishop strongly illustrated this in his remarks on the occasion of the banquet tendered our missionary by the clergy at his Golden Jubilee. His Grace had been a pupil under Father Fitton in the Cathedral School and naturally took an interest in it. Speaking of our missionary's success in furtherance of school work he said: "While Father Fitton was at the head of the Cathedral School it prospered. Scholars were numerous and no drawback checked or marred its onward progress. "When Father Fitton left Boston," continued His Grace, "the school languished and died, and this, under such sterling characters as a Tyler and a Wiley." The last speaker at the banquet was the venerable Jubilarian himself. After expressing his sincere thanks to his brother clergymen for their kindness he launched out on his favorite topic and closed with these words: "You may say that heavy debts confront you and the expense of maintenance of schools would be too great a burden. I say to you in all sincerity, build your school, and it will pay your debt." Twenty years before he had practiced what he was then preaching, for when the Holy Redeemer's debt was soaring into the fifty thousands, he opened his school. The debt little worried him after that.

The subject of our paper had just passed the fiftieth year of his age when he came to East Boston. He was a man

of more than average height and of somewhat portly proportions. His head was large and well fitted to his sturdy frame. His forehead was broad and imposing. An incident which he related in connection with this often caused him much merriment. A peculiarity that attracted attention was the growing of a good size wart on the left side of his forehead, just at the line of parting. One day in his early missions he was thus greeted by a native: "You ain't a Popish Priest." "Why do you think so, young fellow?" he said. "Where are your horns?" the country man replied. Well, said our missionary, now grasping the situation, you see I am a young man, and, pointing to the wart, this is my first horn just beginning to sprout."

A stranger, on first acquaintance, might receive the impression that he was a harsh and gruff man to deal with. Nothing could be farther from the truth. For he had a very tender and sympathetic heart. When speaking to the children on a subject that deeply touched him or saying a word of eulogy over a deceased parishioner he rarely finished his remarks without betraying in his voice and manner the emotion that filled his soul.

God fits the back for the burden is an old saying. His vocation assuredly was that of a missionary. Hence God gave him a fine physique: good digestive powers and excellent health. When a youth in his father's home he had everything he needed. When Bishop Fenwick later took the place of parents, it was the same story. His first real trials and sacrifices came on his mission to the Indians in Maine. Their greasy food and repulsive way of cooking, had much the same effect on his appetite as the sight of a filled dinner table on the stomach of a man in sea-sickness. For some time after his arrival at the Indian Village, his stomach rebelled, but he resolved to conquer his repugnance to their food and he did it. So he returned from Maine, he said, with a full knowledge of the practical side of the gospel admonition to be not solicitous about what one should eat or what one

should drink. From that time onward he determined to take what was set before him and ask no questions, and that wonderfully helped him in the privations that he was afterwards called upon to endure. His health was always good, apart from the one ailment of his life, rheumatism. This he contracted in the damp and chilly basement of the little church in Hartford. It was an annual visitor to his bones, coming invariably in the springtime. Sometimes it placed him on crutches for weeks. But it did not affect his head, and so his work went on. The severest visitations of this sickness came when he could best care for it, in East Boston, after his missionary trips were over.

A very important acquisition to a priest, who is to blaze the way into a new country, is a knowledge of the principles of house construction and of tools and their uses. The missionaries in foreign countries greatly prize such an acquisition. So in the pioneering days of the Church in New England, building of house and church being a prime necessity, our missionary found that the more information one had of these matters, the better equipped and the more successful he would be in his work. His father's business of wheelwright and carriage building gave him just the knowledge needed. He used to tell how, when a boy, he would stand for hours looking at the sparks flying in the air in his father's shop as the iron was hammered into shape, or watching the transformation, under the hands of the workman, of the oaken stick into hub and spoke and panel and thill. Often in a spirit of imitation he would take the tools and try experiments. And so, in the simple forms of building called for on the Mission, he had all the information needed to insure good work at the lowest possible outlay. Once, near the close of his life, when rallied in good natured banter by some of his brother priests regarding his propensity for building, he replied, "how could I help being a builder, wasn't I born with a mallet."

Having completed his church building in East Boston, he started the work of renovation of the stone church, re-

moving the galleries, now no longer necessary, and refrescoing it. In the following summer, that of 1881, he installed a complete steam-heating plant for church, house and school. It was his last work. Scarcely a month after its completion had passed by when he breathed his last. True to his life's ideals, he died in harness. News of his death was quite unexpected, and the people were greatly shocked. No one was prepared for the blow. His intimate friends, however, had noticed that since his visit to the Carney Hospital, some time before for an operation for cataract on the eyes his health had somewhat declined, for the operation visibly told on him.

He made a visit to Saint Anne de Beaupré in August, in the company of a brother priest. He returned from that pilgrimage realizing that the end was approaching. He quietly made his preparations for a happy passage to eternity. His last confession was made to one whose first confession he had heard twenty-six years before. Surrounded by his brother priests he passed away on the morning of September 15th, 1881. On the 19th of the same month, the day of the death of President Garfield, after solemn requiem services in the church, sung by his nephew, Rev. Joseph H. Cassin, in the presence of the Most Rev. Archbishop, the Bishop of Portland, and a number of priests he was consigned to his last resting place. It is no exaggeration to say that the funeral procession, made up from the four parishes, extended from his church to Holy Cross Cemetery in Malden. It was the largest funeral cortege, by far, that ever left East Boston.

It was a matter of surprise to many that his remains were carried to Holy Cross, because it was understood that he was to be buried under the floor of the basement Chapel of the Holy Redeemer. There he would rest side by side with his old friend, Father Wiley, for the vault was constructed so as to hold them both. This was the reason why he was not placed there. Some years after Father Wiley's interment, he had occasion to remove the marble slab that

covered the vault and therein saw a sight that somewhat affected him. A damp and grimy mold had fastened heavily upon the interior of the tomb and its appearance was forbidding. A short time afterward he said to one whom he knew would carry out his request: "When I come to die, bury me where God's sunshine will fall on me." It was indeed appropriate that he should sleep under the sunshine and the stars, for those gracious sunbeams of day and starry sentinels of night were for years the silent witnesses of his Apostolic trials and labors. And it was also fitting that he, who received the light of faith and the grace of Ordination to the Priesthood in Holy Cross Church, and was instrumental in the founding of Holy Cross College should rest from his labors in the hope of a blessed immortality in Holy Cross Cemetery.

A beautiful monument of white marble decorated with the insignia of his sacred calling, was erected over his grave. The inscription on the same was written by one of his "boys," the genial and talented, and at present sorely afflicted pastor of St. Rose's Church, Chelsea, Rev. Thomas F. Cusack, P. R.

It reads as follows:—

Sacred to the memory of Rev. James Fitton,

Born in Boston, Mass., April 10, 1805,

Ordained Priest, December 23, 1827.

Long a Missionary throughout New England

He labored with zeal for the spread of Catholicity

And erected many Churches to the Glory of God.

Twenty-six years Pastor of Church of Most Holy Redeemer,
East Boston.

An early and constant promoter of Catholic Schools.

Of large and benevolent heart

Especially devoted to the youth of his flock.

Beloved by all and loving all.

Died September 15, 1881.

Age 76 years.

Requiescat in pace.

BOSTON COLLEGE



3 9031 028 51985 8

